

The Journey for the Self  
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Joseph:

I have finally seen what you are calling Platonism, and I'd like to review it with you.

Plethon:

I am certain to be pleased, Joseph, in hearing what you have come to understand.

Joseph:

You Platonists start with the notion that the principle of all things is *the One*. Next, what are called Beings are Ideas which are certainly Intellect, concepts since they have a vitality, intelligibility, and are eternal --such as Beauty, Truth, Reality, and the Logos, as well as relational ideas like whole and part, same and different, similar and dissimilar, like and unlike and several more akin to these. The Ideas form a progression without interval and they proceed through the principle of similitude. It is from these Ideas that other principles flow and generate progressions of intellect, soul, and nature.

Plethon:

It is good that you see it this way, and you are likely to enjoy the way Proclus summarizes Platonic thought in his *Theology of Plato*.

Joseph:

Yes, I just recently read it and found it very beautiful. He says, as I recall, that the idea of *the One* is the most profound of Ideas and it grasps so much that lies inherent within the idea that when seen it is an object of wonder.

Plethon:

True it is, but even though it is often called the ultimate principle we also know that the Self as Oneself is more deserving of that honor and reverence.

Joseph:

I have heard and read that the role of the Self is, indeed, playing a major role, but is it not the case, that many Platonists, including your Proclus, frequently ignore what they have said about the Self and continue talking about the ultimate principle as the One? I prefer the idea of the One as the ultimate principle because I imagine that there are as many ideas of the self as there are selves.

Plethon:

Yes, that is so and there have been many discussions offering possible answers to that very puzzle.

Joseph:

If you are into sharing your own thoughts about this intriguing problem I would certainly appreciate hearing about it.

Plethon:

Would you agree that even if we must say that in the description of the nature of Man we must include the many ways in which Man functions, but after listing all the ways he functions we are still left with the question of what after all is Man? However, just suppose that after we say "he not this and not that" and after exhausting all other names we finally say that there is no single name that can describe just what Man is.

Joseph:

I have heard discussions that say Man has so many different sides to his nature that he cannot be a single thing, but a mixed bag of part beast, part saint, or as a rogue, and a charlatan. Many have failed to describe his true nature, if he has one.

Plethon:

Good, thanks for that recollection, but if we say that no name uniquely fits his nature could we not say that he is the sum of all the negatives that we can draw together, that he is fundamentally dishonest, lacking any integrity, and duplicitous? However, you did include that he is "part saint", so we should add a list of positives as well as those negatives, should we not?

Joseph:

I think that I should say that he is a jumble of contradictions since he is part saint and sinner. Are you arguing that if you only know what something is that it will not tell what the thing is? For, is man is that jumble of contradictions we sure won't be able to define him. Or, are you arguing that a blind man who has no grasp of what an elephant is might walk under a tall elephant and by only touching each of his legs and trunk would not be able to grasp that the four legs and trunk belong to an elephant?

Plethon:

Yes, it is something like that because when the One is defined by negatives we only know what it is not. However, we still have many experiences of naming this and that thing as a one. So, we still carry along our past associations and images of our use of the idea of something being a one, do we not?

Joseph:

I think I see what you are saying. Would you say the same thing about the idea of *the Good*? It seems that the same thing is likely to be said about *the Good* as you did with *the One*.

Plethon:

Sure thing, because I think you would argue that the numerous kinds of things called good cannot be attributed to the highest and most profound idea of *The Good*, yet even if we say that this idea of the Good surpasses all predicates,

that we still carry all the uses of the idea of good along with us when we say that all negatives define *the One*, and we can say the same thing about the Good,  
Joseph:

But the highest term in our philosophy, the principle of all principles, is correctly described as *the One*, so we have to ignore this burden of carrying along in our thinking the lesser uses of those very ideas.

Plethon:

We might say that if the One is a principle then it must have some kind of existence, and since you include within it that all proceeds from it, then must it not follow that we have some kind of duality here and not one thing?

Joseph:

I never thought of it that way. You made one into two.

Plethon:

Well, Joseph, if we want to distinguish between saying that something can be defined negatively, would you agree that it would not be the same thing as saying that it transcends all ideas and all things?

Joseph:

I think you are right there, Plethon.

Plethon:

What if we could find a term that has no associations with anything in our physical world, nor any associations with anything in the world of ideas? Let's add to that and say that it could not have anything that can be said to even be like it or similar to it?

Joseph:

Do you really think that there can be an idea that can be said to have no possible likeness or similarity, to anything else? For, an idea that in no way is either like or unlike anything cannot be an idea, right? Frankly, there is no idea that can be said to have absolutely no resemblance or relation with anything else because everything has some kinship or relationship with everything else.

Plethon:

I like the way you reason, but what if there is no need for an argument to either prove or disprove a certain idea, if that idea is truly obvious. What would you say about that?

Joseph:

Wait a minute. An argument is offered as a way to prove something is true, isn't it?

Plethon:

An argument is used to persuade that we are rational enough to follow a line of sound reasoning to believe you understanding something is true.

Joseph:

Well, I knew you would have some kind of trick to pull on me to get me to change my mind. OK, I'll ask, just how can you prove what seems to be so obvious that it does not require any proof? Go ahead.

Plethon:

Here is a page of something I just wrote. Please read it to yourself, there is no need to read it out loud.

Joseph:

Sure thing, I'll be glad to read it. ....So, I found it interesting, but what follows?

Plethon:

What argument can you find that will prove that you have just read that statement? Or, would you say that there is no need to persuade yourself that you have just read that statement?

Joseph:

Could you say that in another way? It seems true enough, but I'd like it if you restate it in other terms.

Plethon:

Can we say that no one can convince you with any argument that you have not just read that statement?

Joseph:

Well, to me it is obvious, that's so, but it wouldn't be true to anyone else that I read that statement.

Plethon:

Could we apply that idea to another thing that might be obvious? I say that because some statements can also be said to be obviously true. For example, if two things share the say same set of predicates are they not two different things but the same thing, or would you they are just one? Or, if they only share some of the same predicates that they are similar and not the same?

Joseph:

You know that you are dragging me around with your strange kind of dialogue, and I hope it all relates to the puzzle we were discussing. So, to answer your question, I'd agree that under that condition it ought to be obviously true.

Plethon:

I am pleased that you are going along, and I do think that you are following. So, then, how similar is the idea of space to the idea of the One in Plato's *Parmenides*?

Joseph:

As I understand his idea of the one, which is a pure one, it can't be a whole since it would have parts and that would mean it would be a many, and not one. He reasons in the same way about all the ways anything relates to anything, but I like what he says about the One not being anywhere, or in anything, or in itself. So, in the end he says it can't be said to be, nor can it be known, nor even be named. So, looking over the idea of space, or empty space, I think, at least at this moment, you could say the same things about it as you can say about the One except it can still be named, space. Wait a minute, I would add that space can be contained in an empty cup so that also makes it different than Parmenides' idea of the One. So, I would say that space and the idea of the One are similar, but not the same, and that's obviously true, right?

Plethon:

Yes, to that, and I like what you said and we can use it to make a few points. Would you agree that you are likely to now have different ideas of yourself from those false beliefs of yourself that you had in your past? If so, is it also not likely you would call those past ideas false ideas of the self?

Joseph:

Now, that is true. I have been lucky to shed several false images of myself. I guess you will say that when I saw them as false I could say that they were truly seen as being obviously false since after seeing them as false they vanished from me.

Plethon:

While there is something that sees and knows the obvious, does it have any marks? I mean at the very time you saw those false ideas of yourself as false could you at that very time describe with accuracy what it was that was seeing the obvious?

Joseph:

What's that? You want to know if I can describe that moment of clarity, or insight, when I saw the obvious? It is an expansive moment like when you feel a burden drops off, or maybe like when the clouds allow a ray of sunshine to break through the midst.

Plethon:

That's good, Joseph, since you hold fast to questions that's your reward. Consider this very moment, just look out and bring all you see into view.

Joseph:

Sure, I see you and all around.

Plethon:

Since you have the whole of your vision in front of you, is your self among what you see?

Joseph:

No, the self is not seen with the eye, but it is the whole that sees, isn't it?

Plethon:

And, there are noises to be heard, so would you say the same about hearing, can the self be heard in this very moment? Again, while your hearing is also a whole that hears, would you say the same about what thinks?

Joseph:

So, the whole is at work, but I can't say what that whole is.

Plethon:

Sure thing, but while it is good to ask what is it that sees, and hears, and thinks, we are asking what is it that is having these wondrous insights that you are having right now.

Joseph:

I think you are asking what is wondering about the wonder of seeing these ideas. For, surely it is a moment of seeing the obvious as true. As for my own self, I'm here but I can't seem to describe it as I would other things. You know I can fall

back on an old idea and say since I am conscious that I have a consciousness of all that I experience. What's wrong with that?

Plethon:

Those who hold that idea need to answer just what is it that is conscious, don't they?

Joseph:

Well, the fact is that there is something that is aware.

Plethon:

Are you not only saying that it is obvious that there is something aware, but that you don't know what it is that is aware?

Joseph:

I don't know if I can say what it is that is aware, but something is and that is actually obvious.

Plethon:

Would you say that its presence is obvious and needs no argument to prove its always as it is?

Joseph:

So, you are saying that in that moment I was able to just be myself, and that the presence of myself is the self?

Plethon:

Perhaps, but is it like anything you have experienced, or even could possibly experience?

Joseph:

No, no experience is like that presence of being as I was.

Plethon:

However, could it not be compared with something else? Is it like some idea of beauty, or anything else, even of the One?

Joseph:

There is nothing like it but what it is in that presence of being what it is,

Plethon:

Interesting, but can it be said to exist, or like anything that has come to be? For, could you say it is, for something that "is" has some mode of existence, and shouldn't any kind of existence be describable?

Joseph:

No, it must be something that is just in itself, pure, and empty of all else.

Plethon:

But, if it is in itself it must be encased or contained by itself as a container contains its contents. If so, did you encounter that in what you experienced?

Joseph:

No, that is rather foolish because it would end up being two things that can be described.

Plethon:

But, Joseph, is it yours? Do you possess that self, or is above any and all possible ways of being?

Joseph:

Beyond it all, yet present to all. Hold it! I see where this is going and I truly like saying that everyone living shares the same and yet each is different without denying its common nature throughout all that is. I seem to be getting poetic as I smile away.

Plethon:

Are you seeing that it is at once personal and universal and unlike anything and that is not likely to even refer to either the One or the Good?

Joseph:

Universal? Well, what is true for me ought to be true to you and to anyone else, that's seems right. I wonder if we can say it would be true for all living things? Do all living being exist in the moment in the way I just spoke about? I wonder about this very thing.

Plethon:

If anything lives must it not encounter others things like itself and like other things?

Joseph:

I'd hazard a guess and say everything that functions in anyway must be aware that it does so. Now, that's for all living things, isn't it?

Plethon:

So, we are back to asking if anything functions in anyway must it not have the presence of being what it is?

Joseph:

Now, that is more than curious.

Plethon:

Yes, that is curious as it is wondrous. But, what can it be compared with?

Joseph:

I'll say it. There is nothing like it since it is both personal and universal.

Plethon:

Isn't it curious that we have been wondering about this idea and you and I have been asking and answering along the way, but can we call what we have been going through an argument, or are we just pointing out what is obvious.

Joseph:

I'm not even sure I know what an argument is since we didn't prove anything, did we? It may be that a line of questions open the mind up to what it didn't know that it knows. Yet, it has been obvious.

Plethon:

Do you mean obviously true, Joseph?

Joseph:

You got me on a roll, so yes to that. I think it's time for me to take my walk. Are you staying here or are you off somewhere?

Plethon:

Actually, I am going to get another cup of coffee here and make a few notes for my talk at the Noetic Society.

Joseph:

Care to share with what you are going to talk about because I always benefit by knowing what coming up ahead of time.

Plethon:

Yes, there has been some discussion of Parmenides' hypothesis concerning "the Oneself, whether the one is or is not" and I will explore the idea that the idea of Self transcends all descriptions while it can be understood to be the source of all things, yet abides as it is, and returns to the Self.

Joseph:

Good heavens, that will be some talk. I'll be there, but for now I've had my fill. I'll just go on my walk and think about what we have said. Thanks.